Handout 8: Preparing for Group Discussions (these points are applicable for most group and meeting situations)

Groups should be well prepared for. Consider the following as you plan a group.

1. Is the issue appropriate for group discussion?

Consider: the importance of a quality decision, and the time it will take for the group to arrive at it; the benefits of obtaining multiple viewpoints; whether acceptance by group members of the decision is necessary for it to be implemented; whether it could cause undue embarrassment to an individual who could be spoken with in private.

2. What is the purpose of the group?

Is it to share information and viewpoints? Ventilate emotions and process issues that are upsetting people? Contribute to a revision of policy or procedure? Be aware that different members may have different agendas. Having an idea of the overall purpose should help you decide how to go about tackling the points below.

3. Research your topic(s), and provide information.

Use publications, policies, other workers, and the internet. Let's say you are running a discussion group for staff on improving a certain procedure in your organisation. Even though this may be a consultative process where you are gathering opinions it is still necessary to at least find out:

What is normal/best practice in other organisations, and why these practices work.

What are practices that are undesirable and why? For example they may have implications for legal liability, or may have been shown to alienate people for some reason (too authoritarian, culturally biased, inequitable).

What else do you already know? Perhaps you have some background knowledge from talking to other workers. Provide the group with relevant knowledge as appropriate to facilitate outcomes.

4. How much controversy and conflict is there likely to be in the group?

This will not only influence your thinking about group agreements, but may also demand that extra time is spent on exploring and defining the problem. Some people may have already arrived resentful at having to attend a ‘waste of time’ group about a ‘non-issue’. How can you safely
allow people to ventilate their emotions? If they do not get the opportunity to say how they feel about certain issues they may not participate in - or may sabotage - the group's functioning.

5. What ground rules, or group agreements would be useful to establish before the group begins?

Consider confidentiality, respecting opinions, how decisions are made and recorded, participation requirements, swearing and name calling, interrupting, speaking order, relative importance of task (what is done) and process (how it is done).

6. What setting is appropriate? Should the group held in a formal or informal setting?

Think about the implications for the following settings: Public hall, classroom, office, meeting room, cafe, boardroom, private home, outdoors. Consider factors such as noise, size, privacy, interruptions, tables and papers. Consider both sorts of climates: temperature and communication - warm, formal, serious, fun, businesslike, creative. What sort of tone do you want to set - formal, informal, or somewhere in between.

7. What equipment is necessary, and does it work?

Consider: butcher's paper, whiteboard, overhead or computer projector, TV/video, speech amplification/recording/translating. Test it!

8. What seating is best?

Usually a circular arrangement promotes equal status and encourages people to speak. A square is preferable to a rectangle or oblong, which suggests there is a 'head of the table'. What numbers are there? More than eight or so means people are less likely to contribute equally, and it will be difficult to obtain cohesion and consensus. Do you need small, 'satellite' tables or spaces so a large group can break up into smaller ones?

9. How much time do you need?

Try and get an idea of the total hours required. Does the group need time to form and become cohesive? Does it need to time to absorb a lot of information before commencing discussion and making decisions? Would it make sense to do it all in one day, or have shorter sessions over a number of weeks?

10. What structure is necessary?

Too much or too little structure will diminish the effectiveness of the group. A group of workmates will only get irritated with introductory
games, but a group of strangers will need to be introduced to each other. You may wish to spend time introducing the purpose and scope of the group, or you may prefer the group to set its own agenda.